

Feeding on the Breath

May 26, 2019

The mind has three kinds of food: sensory contact, sensory consciousness, and what are called the intentions of the intellect, in other words the thoughts and intentions you churn out. As we sit here meditating, there's not much new in terms of sensory contact or sensory consciousness, so the mind's going to churn out a lot of intentions until you give it something better to feed on. This is why directed thought and evaluation are part of the first stage in right concentration.

You have to learn how to direct your mind to a topic it finds interesting. Then you evaluate and adjust it in such a way that you feel you can settle down with a sense of ease and well-being. The image the Buddha gives is of a bathman who's mixing a ball of soap dough that, back in those days, they would use instead of bars of soap. You'd start with a powder and then mix it with water, kneading the water through the powder in the same way you'd knead water through dough for bread. In the same way, as you meditate, you get a sense of ease from staying focused on the breath and then you knead it through the body.

So you have to figure out: Where are you going to get the sense of ease? Where are you going to get the rapture that's supposed to go along with it? And then how do you spread it through the body? That's the work of evaluation because once there's that sense of well-being, it can be food for the mind. Until then, you're going to have to depend on your thoughts. Now the problem is if the thoughts about the breath are not interesting enough, the mind's going to create other thoughts to feed on. In fact, it's been spending most of its time since it learned how to think in words churning out thoughts, churning out words, sometimes randomly, sometimes with a purpose. But it's trying to provide itself with a steady supply of food so that when things outside are not interesting, it'll have something interesting to think about.

You see this very clearly as you're trying to settle down and you meditate. There's not much going on right now. There's just the subtle sound of the drizzle outside, the dripping off the roof, not much to hold your attention. As soon as the Dhamma talk is over, there won't be much else to listen to. And so the mind's first response is to churn out thoughts.

So you have to learn how to think about the breath in a way that makes it interesting, to fight off those other thoughts that would pull you away. I was speaking with an osteopath yesterday. He was saying how, in their theory, there are many diaphragms in the body, in other words, parts of the body that are

influential in the movement of the breath energy through the body. So it's not just the diaphragm under the lungs. There's an energy diaphragm in each foot, in each knee, down in the pelvis, right around the collarbone and in the middle of the head. So you might want to think about that. How do these different parts of the body help the breath energy move? In which parts does it seem to be stuck? Especially if you have trouble with circulation down in your legs as you're sitting here cross-legged, you might want to start with the sense of breath energy moving through the feet. In other words, the feet are breathing, the knees are breathing. If your legs tend to go numb, this is a good thing to think about. You've got a good reason to think about moving the energy down there.

If you have a particular illness, you can think about how the breath energy, when you get familiar with it, can be helpful in treating the illness. I noticed with a lot of Ajaan Fuang's lay students, after he died, that many of them drifted away from meditation. The ones who didn't drift away were the ones who had diseases and who had found that working with the breath was helpful for treating the disease.

In other words, if you can give yourself a good reason to be here, doing nothing but watching your breath, that kind of thinking can help the mind stay interested, because you're looking for ways in which the breath energy can improve your physical condition and to give the mind a good place to settle down.

When there finally is a sense of well-being, then you've got something to work with. You think about how to spread it. If you squeeze it, then you've destroyed it. Some people try to squeeze it through the body like you would squeeze toothpaste out of a tube. But breath energy doesn't respond well to being squeezed. It prefers to be allowed. So when there's a sense of well-being, say in the chest, think of allowing it to spread out to the shoulders then down the arms, down to the fingers; then again from the chest down through the torso, down the legs. Get it so that it can spread easily throughout the whole body. You have to think of opening, opening, opening the breath channels for this to happen. But this gives you something good to think about, gives the mind some food so that it doesn't go snacking on other things.

There will be another part of the mind that's going to churn out thoughts for a while that are totally unrelated to the breath. But you have to keep on doing your best to make the breath interesting. You can't be just on the receiving side saying, "I want this to be made interesting for me." After all, it is your suffering that you're trying to overcome. You have to want to do this. This is one of the reasons why the ajaans in Thailand didn't explain things too much to their students. They weren't there trying to please the students or to hand things to them on a platter.

Their assumption was that they were willing to teach you if you wanted to learn. And one way you show that you want to learn is that you make the meditation interesting. If you haven't yet found a way to make the breath interesting, work at it. After all, the breath energy in your body is going to have a big impact on your health, a big impact on your sense of well-being as you sit here.

So it's up to you to find what you can think about that would make the breath intriguing, something really worth studying, really worth getting to know. That way, the mind gets fed. It doesn't go off to nibble on other things. And as you begin to create a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness, then you can feed on that. But be careful how you feed. Don't go gobbling it down or wallowing in it. You still have to be with the breath. In the beginning, the distinction between breath and the comfort that's caused by the breath will be hard to see. But always make sure that the perception of breath is there, that it doesn't fade away and leave you with nothing but thoughts of, "ease, well-being." It's your attention to the breath that keeps that well-being going.

So be alert to the breath. Keep the breath in mind and then learn how to play with that sense of well-being, how to relate to it in a way that doesn't destroy it, so that it can go to different parts of the body. And ask yourself which parts of the body tend to be starved of breath energy—the ones that get neglected, down in the toes, maybe between the fingers, different parts of the head. Look around. Feed those parts, too. See what you can do to give a sense of extreme fullness to the breath. And as long as the fullness feels good, keep it up.

When it begins to feel oppressive, you can think of ways of dissipating it. One is to focus in on the fact that right there where that sense of fullness is, there's also a subtler level of energy. If you focus on that subtler level, it's as if the sense of fullness disappears. Or if the fullness feels oppressive, that it's putting pressure on something, remind yourself: You can't put pressure on something unless you have a perception of something solid for it to put pressure against. So try to destroy any sense any perception you have of the solidity of the body. Think of the breath energy as being your sensation of the body. In other words, your awareness of the body right now is all breath, and that'll calm things down.

So there's work to be done. There's thinking and evaluating, and that can be your food—if you make the thoughts interesting enough, make the evaluation perceptive enough so that when the well-being comes, you know what to do with it. Even when it's there, you don't just feed off that. You figure out: What's the best thing to do with this? How can you learn to modulate it so it's just right? There's a sense that the breath in the body begins to suffuse everything and it can move quickly from one part of the body to another, so that the felt need to

breathe gets weaker and weaker. You've got what you need inside. The body feels nourished.

When they say that the breath stops in the higher levels of concentration, it's not because you try to make it stop. It's simply because everything gets so well connected that there's no felt need to breathe. So the body's well nourished.

I have a student who has problems with the oxygen level in her blood. She has to wear a little monitor to let her know when the oxygen level gets low so that she can take some oxygen from a canister she always keeps nearby. I told her, "Try breathing with your whole body, and see if you can get more energy and more oxygen into your blood." And she found that she could keep the oxygen level higher by simply thinking of "whole body, whole body, whole body breathing," thinking of all those diaphragms breathing in, breathing out in unison.

So the body is being nourished. And if you relate to the breath properly, the mind gets nourished as well. It won't feel the need to go sneaking out for a little midnight snack. It's got all the food it needs right now, and it's all health food. The ease, the well-being that come from concentration, as the Buddha said, have no drawbacks. There's nothing blameworthy about them.

So learn how to think about the breath in a way that you can feed off it, that allows you to adjust the breath and the sense of the breath filling the body so that you can begin to put some of that thinking aside, and the mind really can settle down and find some peace, a peace that feels fully nourished.